

A MODEST HERO



Daily News/DEVON RAVINE

Staff Sgt. Michael (center) is hugged by a co-worker shortly after receiving the Purple Heart during a ceremony Thursday at Hurlburt Field. The Hurlburt airman was one of several military personnel injured during a U.S. strike against a fortress near Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan on Nov. 26.

'Heroism, sacrifice'

Airman is awarded a Purple Heart during ceremony

By KIMBERLY BLAIR
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HURLBURT FIELD — Eleven days ago, Staff Sgt. Michael was wounded during a bloody battle against Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.

On Thursday, Michael was stateside receiving a Purple Heart during a ceremony at Hurlburt Field.

He is the first Air Force member to receive the medal for injuries received in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Wearing the signature scarlet beret of an Air Force Special Operations combat controller, Michael, whose last name is not being released for security reasons, said he doesn't feel like he's a hero.

"I'm honored to be included among the ranks of those who have earned this award," said Michael, a 27-year-old from Oxford, Conn.

"I do not feel that it puts me in the company of heroes, however. The true heroes are the American people who have



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Lt. Gen. Maxwell C. Bailey, commander of the U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command at Hurlburt Field, pins a Purple Heart on Staff Sgt. Michael during a ceremony Thursday at Hurlburt Field's airpark.

continued on with their lives following the tragic events of Sept. 11, especially the firefighters, police officers and family members, as well as the soldiers, airmen, sailors and Marines supporting Operation

Enduring Freedom," he said.

Combat controllers are combat air traffic controllers who go in behind enemy lines to provide coordinates for landings, bombing missions, and supply and personnel drops.

Michael, who spent a month in Afghanistan riding on horseback from position to position with members of the northern alliance, read a brief statement to the dozens of local and national media attending the ceremony. Still recovering from a ruptured eardrum, he said he was not up to fielding questions. He also reportedly suffered a scratched cornea.

Michael and four Army special operations servicemen were wounded on Nov. 26 from an explosion inside an ancient Afghan fortress during an uprising by Taliban prisoners outside the city of Mazar-e-Sharif, according to reports.

The men were part of an 11-person team of special forces sent into the fortress to look for two CIA agents possibly inside the fortress, one of whom was later found dead.

They never came in contact with the agents. With gunfire surrounding them, the soldiers radioed for help. Shortly after, they felt a massive

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explosion. Military officials said an errant U.S. missile wounded the soldiers.

All five suffered wounds ranging from broken bones to ruptured eardrums.

The soldiers received their Purple Hearts on Dec. 1 in Germany.

Michael, however, asked to have his ceremony delayed until he could return to Hurlburt, where he is a member of the 720th Special Tactics Group with Air Force Special Operations Command.

With his wife, family and numerous civic and AFSOC leaders looking on, Michael stood at attention while his commander, Lt. Gen. Maxwell C. Bailey, pinned on the medal.

"This ceremony serves as a sobering reminder that what we do is demanding and dangerous," Bailey said. "Today we honor Mike's individual heroism and sacrifice with this award of the Purple Heart."

The Purple Heart is the oldest U.S. military decoration still in use and the first award made available to a common soldier.

Established by Gen. George Washington in 1782, the medal was revived on Feb. 2, 1932, out of respect to the memory and military achievement of Washington.

It is awarded for wounds or death as a result of an act of any opposing armed force and as a result of an international terrorist attack. Those wounded or killed as a result of military operations while serving as part of a peace-keeping force can also receive the medal.

"To risk your life in the defense of our nation is the ultimate expression of patriotism," Bailey said.

He pointed out that to win the fight on terrorism will require the sacrifice of other American families, and their fighting men and women.

In fact, the ceremony was somewhat overshadowed by the fact that three members of the

Army special forces were killed in Afghanistan this week and 19 other U.S. military members were injured.

Maj. Karen Finn, a spokeswoman with AFSOC, would not comment on the accident, which is still under investigation. It, too, was blamed on an errant U.S. guided missile.

"That is a solemn reminder to all of us that these times are dangerous," said Finn.

Bailey, however, said that Americans can all take comfort in knowing that the fight will be carried on by people like Michael and his teammates.

"We know we can count on them to be the first there so others may live," said Bailey, citing the motto of Special Tactics Group.

Among the crowd of Michael's peers was a veteran combat controller, Charlie Jones of Navarre.

Jones, 69, who retired from the Army special forces after serving in the Air Force, was the second Air Force combat controller to receive the Purple Heart.

He was the first one that was living when he received it, though.

"The first one was Dick Fox, who was shot down in 1962. I was with him and brought his body back to the states," said Jones, who earned the Purple Heart when injured while the plane he was in was shot down during a secret mission against North Vietnamese targets in 1966.

"Soldiers do not do what they do for accolades. They do what they do because they are driven inside from patriotism and commitment," said Jones, who did not have a formal ceremony when he received his medal during the height of the unpopular Vietnam War.

As ground combat intensifies in Afghanistan, Michael said he would go back tomorrow if he could.

"Without a hesitation, yes. I love my job and what I do and I understand the risks," he said. "There is no greater satisfaction than knowing your job is defending the freedom of the United States of America."